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ABSTRACT

Suggestions for teaching without lecturing, and with wide student participation are presented. Having students work in varying groups is proposed to help students feel comfortable about participating. A weekly oral evaluation by the students of the instruction and course content is viewed as a valuable tool both for the instructor and for enabling students to assert themselves. Other recommendations include: giving quizzes in pairs and trios; having students prepare questions for discussion based on assigned reading; allowing enough time for students to respond to discussion questions; and using games, simulations, and activities that call for the participation of everyone in a variety of ways. (SPG)

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IMPROVING COLLEGE TEACHING BY ENCOURAGING WIDER STUDENT PARTICIPATION

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Changing the teaching style of individual instructors seems easier than changing the institutions in which teaching occurs; however, teaching style is clearly influenced by the kinds of institutions which universities are. Some, therefore, would say that until and unless we change universities (and, beyond that, society), we will not truly effect teaching change. I am not going to discuss these matters, important as they are--rather I am going to talk about changing ones own teaching, using knowledge and behaviors which can be rather readily learned.

The reasons that most university teaching consists of lecture, or lecture with some discussion are complex. Lectures have been with us since the days when the teacher was the book, and even though we now have so many other ways besides books to give information (xeroxed materials, tape recorders, and so on), we continue to stand in front of the class and lecture; partly because we tend to do as we were done to, and so we teach as we were taught. In addition, we must give up some control if we are to give up lecturing, and few people readily relinquish power. Persumably the people here are ready to give up power and lecturing--and indeed have probably already done so, to a lesser or greater extent, so I am going to discuss some of the ways in which I teach without lecturing, and with wide student participation.

If people are to participate, the classroom must be a place where students can express their ideas and opinions without fear of being 'put down' by their professor or peers. Otherwise students will be silent, save for those few who talk no matter what, and there will be little opportunity for learning from

HE 010 304

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each other, and discovering the tremendous variety and strength among ones fellow students. Many students have an immense fear of appearing stupid in class, and if we want good discussions, then students must feel comfortable with us and with each other. I find that one of the best means for achieving this level of comfort is to have studentswork frequently in varying groups so that they get to know one another well. Just getting to know each other helps to cut down on that 'they'll laugh at me' fear. I divide my classes into small groups in many ways: by interest, by counting off, by choosing people they haven't yet been with, by inventing new means of grouping. The more comfortable we become with each other, the more I feel free to move into probing comments which are not criticisms.

Since I seldom have discussions which involve 'right' answers (i.e. tell me what I said, or what the book said), I try to accept student contributions, whenever possible, without judging them as 'good' or 'bad'. As the semester progresses, the collaborative atmosphere encourages students to take risks. As we become more comfortable with each other I gradually move into pinpointing kinds of questions: why? what are the ramifications of your point of view? do you know that there are people who say that...? I appreciate your point of view; I however, believe that.... what do the rest of you think about what was just said? I encourage students to learn to challenge each other in positive and helpful ways, avoiding devestating remarks like, "That's total nonsense!" or "You mean you actually believe such a thing!" We try to avoid smirks and sneers, which are so common in many classrooms; and we talk about the fact that making people more defensive by challenging them in negative ways may make them more skillful at defending the point of view they hold, but doesn't do much toward opening their minds to new and different ideas. Every classroom, no matter what the content, is one, I believe, in which the dynamic forces at work can be made explicit and used to further learning.

In order to share power, gain important information about the course, and therefore upgrade my teaching and the course content, I have an oral evaluation session about every other week (more often if the need arises). This is done in groups of about five, and one person reports for the entire group, so participants can be anonymous. Initially I permit only complaints and suggestions for change, since I find that students often take refuge in compliments before they know an instructor well enough to realize that complaints will not be dealt with punitively. In these sessions it is important to avoid becoming defensive. Certainly, I feel free to explain why I do certain things as I do, but I make clear that I am open to their suggestions. I find this on-going oral evaluation to be far more useful than written comments, because we all immediately deal with and discuss what arises, and the value of continual evaluation over one or two sessions a semester seems obvious.

Although I do share some decisions with students, I am clear about the fact that I have more power, and also that I usually have more expertise in matters related to the course than they do. I do not hesitate to make decisions without consulting students, and the overall plan of the course is quite clearly mine. For example, if I want students to do the required reading, but don't necessarily wish to discuss that reading in class, I give quizzes on that content. I realize that this furthers the habit of reading for the test, and I discuss this with the class, but I do want the students to have a background of knowledge for the course, and I also know that many students will not do the reading without a "push." With the exception of a few solo quizzes, so that I know who needs remedial help and who are the more and less able students, for purposes of grading, I give most quizzes in pairs or trios. Students are always free to take tests alone, if they prefer, and we have an agreement that people ought to amiably split up if they have any trouble working together. (This arrangement is the result of an evaluation session, when students felt that

the option to work alone should always be offered.)

The advantages to students of taking tests together and learning from each other are enormous, and the advantages to the instructor should not be minimized. The chore of reading vast amounts of student work is one reason, I think, that so many instructors stick with a mid-semester, a final, and perhaps one paper, but I do not believe that these means are the best for either on-going evaluation or for learning. I try to make the quizzes as thought-provoking as possible, again, because I don't want to use the 'tell me what the book said' model. A typical first quiz, given in pairs, might ask students to formulate a question, based on the reading, which they think is important for students in our class to be able to respond to, and then explain why they think it's important. They are not asked to answer their question. I speak beforehand about what an important question is; that it's not simply a recall question, but might ask for application of knowledge. My second quiz, taken alone, is often the same, so that students can benefit from having heard examples of what good questions are after the first quiz. I do not announce in advance whether the quiz will be taken alone or together, and I vary the groupings for quizzes, at times purposely linking poor quiz-takers with good ones, so that the poorer students have an opportunity to upgrade their skills.

If instructors want discussion to occur around assigned reading, I suggest that students be asked to come to class with two or three written questions based on the reading; with which they would like to deal, and which they think are important, or which have some other specific focus. I would then divide the class into groups to share these questions, and decide on one or two to talk about; and the discussion can start from there, either with the whole class or within the small groups. I would also collect the papers to be sure that the assignment has been done, and as a further means of evaluation.

During discussion times I try to make my own questions thought-provoking, which often means writing them out in advance. Since questions which require thought also require time to think, I make sure that I give the students time--waiting past the point when I begin to feel uncomfortable with the silence. If there is no response after a reasonable time has elapsed, I may suggest that students talk briefly with a neighbor about the question, andthis usually gets the discussion started. It's especially important to avoid becoming annoyed when students don't answer, and say things like, "I don't know why I give time for discussion inthis course--you aren't even interested enough to come to class prepared to participate like adults!"

The longer I teach, the more I use activities and experiences in my courses. (I don't usually have students lead the class, since this often results in lectures, or panel discussions by people who are less adept at this than I am. If student presentations seem appropriate, I believe that instructors must put a great deal of time and effort into helping leaders of the sessions with the content and the means of presentation.) I use games, simulations, and activities which call for the participation of everyone in a variety of ways. I always try to think what it is I want the students to remember when they have forgotten everything else, and then decide upon activities which will accomplish this. The activity is what provides the interesting format for the ensuing generalizing and conceptualizing which results in the desired learning.

I teach teachers and future teachers, and in my own courses I try to use activities which are appropriate to students' ages, while at the same time making clear how similar activities can be used with children. Just one example. After the first session, which is a very comfortable one in which we spend time getting to know each other in very caring ways, we play, in the second session, a game called "Life" which can be played either collaboratively

or competatively. Without exception the game is played with much competition and resultant bad feeling. We compare these two sessions, which I make clear have been planned by me to create, on the one hand, a collaborative environment, and, on the other, a competative one. We relate this to schools, to the power of the teacher, and to the way we want to be. The emphasis in the discussion, with help from me, is on trying to learn from our behavior; not on attacking and defending--not on learning to argue more persuasively in order to convert others, but on examining behavior and seeing how environment affects actions.

In summary, if we are interested in increasing student participation, while upgrading the cognitive and affective level of our teaching, we must put a good deal of effort into both planning course content, and providing a productive learning environment. In addition to preparing experiences which are provocative, we must decrease the amount of our own talk, so that student talk can increase; and we must encourage and acknowledge students' ideas and opinions when they do speak. Then we will be facilitators of active student learning, rather than information-givers to passive audiences.

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